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Congress Cautious on Military Aid Requested by Reagan for Contras

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WASHINGTON—The Reagan administration last spring helped persuade Rep. Dave McCurdy to support U.S. economic aid for the insurgents fighting Nicaragua's leftist government. But now the administration can't convince the Oklahoma Democrat to endorse military assistance for the Contras.

"In order to establish any bipartisan support, it's essential for the administration to first demonstrate a real commitment to negotiate a political solution to the region's problems," says Rep. McCurdy. "But there's great skepticism about whether they've really presented a proposal and tried to deal with it." As a result, he concludes, "If they just have a (aid) package that floats up here, they'll have a hard time getting support. I'd have a lot of trouble voting for it."

Rep. McCurdy's doubts reflect the mood of the House as it awaits an expected White House request for military and nonlethal aid to the Contras. Last spring, Rep. McCurdy joined a majority of the Democrat-controlled House to defeat an administration proposal for \$14 million in Contra aid. But then he changed his mind and supported the \$27 million nonlethal aid package that Congress approved last summer. That package was approved partly because of an ill-timed trip to Moscow by Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega that seemed to confirm the administration's darkest warnings about the leftist Sandinistas, and embarrassed the congressmen who had opposed Contra aid.

But now, many members of Congress, such as Rep. McCurdy, are cautiously holding the middle ground. Although the Sandinistas' actions have moved legislators closer to the Reagan administration's dim view of the Managua regime, Congress is unimpressed with President Reagan's efforts to resolve the conflict peacefully. As a result, Congress appears unwilling to take the next step—approving open military support for rebels attempting to overthrow a government that Washington continues to recognize.

Rep. McCurdy is one of the leaders of about three dozen Democrats who switched votes last year on Contra aid. As a member of the House Intelligence Committee,

he has access to secret information about Sandinista activity in Central America. And as a centrist Democrat, he is identified with a bloc of moderates and conservatives that has become sensitive to the need to appear tough on defense and foreign-policy issues.

In a letter last year, Mr. Reagan promised Rep. McCurdy that, if these Democrats switched their votes on Contra aid, the administration would support regional peace efforts. The White House also recognized the importance of bilateral talks, under the right circumstances, with the Sandinistas. But, instead, what the legislators have heard in the past few months is the harsh rhetoric of Elliott Abrams, assistant secretary of state for Inter-American Affairs, who says that a diplomatic agreement with the Sandinistas "without some internal change in that regime" isn't "worth the paper it's printed on."

The perceived lack of interest in negotiations, which has produced caution in Rep. McCurdy, has prompted the desertion of other Democrats who never felt comfortable supporting the president's call for aid to the Contras. "I thought the president had a genuine commitment toward some kind of peace process in the region," says Rep. William Richardson (D., N.M.). "But I think he has been insincere in his commitment to peace." Rep. Richardson says he won't support further aid to the Contras if military assistance is included.

The White House is expected to have less trouble with an aid package in the Republican-controlled Senate, which approved the assistance twice last year.

Most experts agree President Reagan could win Congress's support for a renewal of nonmilitary aid, which runs through March 31. Last November Congress quietly approved a small, classified amount of aid that allows the administration to use U.S. intelligence operatives in Central America to share information with the Contras. Legislators also approved funds for communications equipment and related training for the insurgents.

But even administration officials wonder if Congress is ready to increase the pressure by approving military aid. "There's been a shift, but how big and how far it's gone is something we're still measuring," an administration official says.